

## A Rethinking of Dating for the Christian in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

*Author's Note: You are going to read this and think this is weird. I hope at least you consider the arguments I am making and the challenges we are facing. Know that I write this to teach but also to encourage. We've all made mistakes. It's time to own them and do better.*

I know what you are probably thinking: why wade into these murky and turbulent waters? For a number of reasons. One is that I have two daughters, so this topic is something my wife and I have discussed for a number of years. Another reason is...*we are doing it wrong!*<sup>1</sup> **We have blindly, uncritically followed the world with respect to its dating practices.** In every way. And finally, I address this topic to offer an *alternate view of the universe*—God's desire for His creation as lived out in man and woman.

Before I begin, I realize that I am writing to a number of people in different seasons of life. You might be a life-long bachelor. You might be a widow or widower. You might be a grandparent. You might be someone who is happily married and did everything *differently* from what I propose. But we all want what's best, not just for our families but for the saints in the Church. So, this topic is important **for you** because as Christians *we all have roles to play in the habits and practices of dating and marriage.*

With that said, I also remind you that we have all fallen short of the glory of God. No one is righteous, not even one. We are justified by His grace as a gift, through the blood of Jesus, Who has redeemed us from our trespasses. By the Holy Spirit, as renewed and regenerate Christians, God through St. Paul asks us

“...in the Lord Jesus that, just as you have received from us how it is necessary for you to live and to please God, just as indeed you are living, that you progress even more. For you know what commands we gave to you through the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in lustful passion, just as also the Gentiles who do not know God; not to transgress and to exploit his brother in the matter, because the Lord is the one who avenges concerning all these things, just as also we told you beforehand and testified solemnly. For God did not call us to impurity, but in holiness. Therefore the one who rejects this is not rejecting man, but God, who also gives his Holy Spirit to you.” (1 Thessalonians 4:1-8; New Lexham Translation)

This presentation is organized under the headings of three axioms—*Love is Obedience, Boys Lie and Girls Manipulate*, and *Dating is for Married People*. Afterwards, using a biblical **and** secular narrative, I propose a way *to try* to navigate this issue with our own children, asking some questions and suggesting some practices.

### Prologue or First Things

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<sup>1</sup> When I say “we” I mean the majority of Americans in the Christian Church.

Before we begin, however, I must place this discussion in the framework of *God's will for His redeemed and renewed creatures with respect to human sexuality*. For as you will see, I am hunting bigger game than *simply* dating. With this essay, I seek to address **how it is that we might live faithfully according to the will of God and His Word**.

But there are some other things I address at the outset. One is that a number of young people are *not even dating anymore*. Are they interacting with opposite sex? Many, yes. Are they doing so in a chaste and God-pleasing way? Certainly not. Smart phone technology enables God's people to consume a vast amount of pornography on a weekly and even daily basis. If you are not aware of the statistics, please take a look.<sup>2</sup> This is an epidemic in the Church *that no one talks about*. This fact alone has changed the dating landscape dramatically. Smart phones have also greatly altered the interaction between boys and girls with "sexting" and dating apps, which are used to "hook up". All of these things, driven by the rampant promiscuity messaged in every aspect of our society and culture, is leading to many, many Christians to delay marriage or not seek marriage at all.<sup>3</sup>

So, as I talk about the topic of dating, please remember that there are underlying issues afoot, many of which we have kicked down the road for decades. But I also realize that amidst all of the morass of sin and its effects, we never seem to get around to actually talk about *dating properly understood in the context of marriage and a God-pleasing walk that He desires*.<sup>4</sup>

With that said, let's begin our conversation.

### **Axiom #1: Love is Obedience**<sup>5</sup>

We start here because the entire world has defined "love" entirely wrong. And if we get love wrong, then our goals and actions looking for love *will be wrongheaded*. So, here it is: love is **not** (primarily) an emotion. Do we feel things towards people we love? Yes. Do we "fall in love" with our potential spouses? Sure. But love understood from a biblical and Christological perspective is about *service* and *sacrifice*. **Love is obediently serving the needs of another and putting their needs above our own**. It is giving up of yourself for another. "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, *as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us*, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." (Ephesians 5:1-2; ESV)

So, love is not a feeling *but an action*. It is busy, kind and patient. It does not boast or draw attention to itself. So, when talking about "dating",<sup>6</sup> we must always view love *as being obedient to another person, and putting their needs above our own*. So, if we put of our wants, needs and

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<sup>2</sup> See the stories [The Porn Phenomenon - Barna Group](#) and [Mission Frontiers - 15 Mind-Blowing Statistics About Pornography And The Church](#).

<sup>3</sup> I am not even scratching the surface with all of the ideas out there with respect to "gender" and gender roles.

<sup>4</sup> See the 1 Thessalonians quote above!

<sup>5</sup> I have freely "borrowed" the first two axioms from Pastor Scott Bruzek, of St. John Lutheran in Wheaton, Illinois. Over the years I have tweaked them, but I owe him the credit for his brilliant formulation.

<sup>6</sup> For the rest of the article, "dating" in quotation marks highlights the cultural practices I am writing *against*.

desires aside and instead are obedient to another's well-being, **we love that person**. Seeing love this way enables us to situate human relationships as imitators of God's love of us in His Son Jesus. We expand discussion of love beyond feelings between a man and a woman, but love that affects *every human*.

### **Axiom #2: Boys Lie and Girls Manipulate**

Now we are getting down to it! When talking to an audience of ladies I emphasize the former (boys lie), but I realize that that might not be helpful if, say, some of them have sons! The point is that we must be *brutally honest* about *what commonly happens in interactions between the sexes, especially during the teen years*. Boys of a certain age have only one thing on their mind: they will and do say anything to achieve their goals. I know this because I was a boy once and am still a sinner! My basic premise is—a girl cannot and should not believe anything that comes out of a boy's mouth until verified, double-checked, and co-signed by a third party.

It has been pointed out to me that girls also lie. Duly noted. The broader issue is that both sexes operate with general patterns of sinful behavior. We've discussed boys. The pattern of most any girl is to *manipulate the single-mindedness of boys*. Girls can play one boy off another with a look, a smile, a toss of the head. We all know this; it's not popular to say it. To capture the essence of this, I appeal to the 1967 Disney film *The Jungle Book*. At the end of the movie Mowgli and Baloo have defeated Shere Khan. It's time for Mowgli to return to the man-village. He doesn't want to go, until...he meets a beautiful young village girl at the riverside. Upon noticing him, she "accidentally" drops her water jar so that Mowgli might fetch it and carry it back to town. Spoiler alert—Mowgli is "manipulated" into going with her into town!

We must be honest about our proclivities to sin, manifested in each sex, especially with regards to "dating". Young people lack maturity, don't have the practice of enduring temptation, and are driven by unchecked hormones and urges.<sup>7</sup> So, what do we commonly allow<sup>8</sup> our children to do? Following the practice of the world, Christians let their sixteen year olds go on "dates", to spend time *alone together without any supervision and accountability*. We then act surprised when they fall into temptation and give full reign to their proclivities. Knowing what seems self-evident, we instead should rethink any allowance of "dating" for teens and even college-age kids.<sup>9</sup>

### **Axiom #3: Dating Should Lead to Marriage and Is for Married People**

If you are tracking with me, you might see that I am suggesting that we stop thinking of "dating" as an acceptable way for boys and girls to interact. Because, "dating" is for people *who are already married*. "Now you've lost your mind!" No...I actually have thought through our

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<sup>7</sup> All of these things certainly plague adults, but through repentance and faith, one does mature.

<sup>8</sup> "Allow" is too strong for what often happens. Many times parents are the last to know that their child is "dating" someone!

<sup>9</sup> Just because our son or daughter is away at school does not mean we stop being interested in how they conduct themselves.

common practices and where they inevitably lead. But we must start with the basic principle—**dating<sup>10</sup> must lead to marriage**. Let me put it this way. If dating doesn't lead to marriage, then what is the purpose in letting our children “date”, sometimes as young as 6<sup>th</sup> grade? What is the goal? Honestly ask yourself this question. What is to be gained by allowing your daughter to go to a movie unchaperoned with a boy to a movie? What will happen if two 8<sup>th</sup> graders go off with a group of friends for a daytrip to Six Flags?<sup>11</sup>

I remember the first time I heard this challenge to dating openly discussed.<sup>12</sup> I was confused and my knee-jerk reaction was push-back. I was married at the time, but we didn't have children. And I had made *many of the mistakes outlined above*. But I realize my core objection was, “Surely *everyone* can't be wrong about this!” But the discussion stuck with me, because as I have said, most every other outcome in “dating” scenarios are rooted in sin. Think of how many times you've heard well-meaning Christians say things like, “I just want my kids to have fun in college and date around” or “They're too young to settle down...just date until you meet the right person”. What we sacrifice so that our children are “well-adjusted” and “socialized”!

So, my argument is: **once you're married, then you “date”**. That is, you spend time alone together, you share intimacy, you exchange romantic gestures. You have “date nights”. That's the fruit of marriage—a lifelong, physical bond in which man and woman share a robust life together including intimacy. But if you are “dating” before being joined together as one flesh, you will be tempted to engage in activities God reserves *solely* for marriage. Even an innocent dinner and a movie can tempt us to engage in practices that are not God pleasing.

Stop right now and assess. If you accept that I *might* be right (even partially), then the big question is: **how are boys and girls to “meet someone” and find a suitable mate to marry?**

### **What Might Christian Courtship Look Like? Two Stories**

To illustrate my point biblically, I share the story of Isaac and his eventual wife Rebekah.<sup>13</sup> When Abraham was old in years, he sought a wife for his son Isaac. It was imperative that Isaac **did not** marry a woman from the land of Canaan, *but a woman from his own tribe and family*.<sup>14</sup> So, Abraham sent his most-trusted servant to the Mesopotamian city of Nahor. He was to take many choice gifts to *honor the family and entice them to give a wife for Isaac*. The angel of the Lord led this enterprise, ensuring that all would be done in accordance with God's will. So he went, and after a fortuitous encounter at the town well, he meets Rebekah, a *young woman very attractive in appearance and one who had been kept from men*. It was revealed that she was **the**

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<sup>10</sup> Now I am speaking of dating in the supervised and intentional process of matching together a man and woman with the prospect of forming a life-long union.

<sup>11</sup> If you really don't know, then I would reconsider the above section!

<sup>12</sup> It was offered by the now-sainted Rev. Paul McCain at a bible study in the early 2000's at St. Paul's Des Peres.

<sup>13</sup> Genesis 24:-67. Biblical narratives are tricky to apply to a modern context. So much is culture-bound and specific to exceptional situations. What can be seen is general principles that reflect the wisdom of our Creator and His will for His creation meant to lead to a human flourishing.

<sup>14</sup> We are talking extended family here.

**one for Isaac.** Rebekah ran back and told her family she had met a servant of Abraham, and they invited him to dinner. They learned the purpose of his journey. He put a proposal to them for Rebekah's hand, couched in *the free invitation* from Abraham for his son Isaac. Rebekah's family was to choose whether *they might accept the invitation for marriage or not*. While the family accepted on her behalf, it was Rebekah's choice on whether she went immediately or remained for some days, showing some autonomy and respect to her wishes. Rebekah and her women rose and went with Abraham's servant and his men.

Isaac (not heard from in the story!) was dwelling in the Negeb, meditating in the fields. He lifted up his eyes and saw the caravan coming. Rebekah lifted up her eyes and saw Isaac. When she learned who it was, she covered herself with her veil. The servant told Isaac all that had transpired. Then Isaac brought Rebekah into the tent of Sarah his mother and *took her for his wife*. Consider that Isaac and Rebekah didn't date, but were joined together by a third party with their best interests at heart. Also consider that Moses tells us explicitly that *Isaac loved Rebekah*.

To make my point even more provocatively, I reference a well-known story from the early '70s.<sup>15</sup> It came to pass that a young man from New York was spending time with relatives in Sicily. One day while out for a walk, he came across a young woman and was struck by her beauty, like a thunderbolt. Afterwards in a near-by village, his companions relate this experience to a local man. It soon becomes clear to the man that the young maiden they were describing *was his daughter*. He took offense and became indignant. However, the young man *spoke to him kindly and showed respect*. He asked the father for *permission to court his daughter with the intent of marriage*. A meeting was arranged, *in the presence and company of the young girl's family*. The man from New York brought gifts for the girl as well as her household. And so it was, he was allowed to date her *in the presence of her family*. In a poignant scene, the two are permitted to walk alone together ahead of the party to share in some *strictly supervised intimate conversation*. The family dined and the couple spend more time together, again in their company. They are finally married before the Lord and the whole village. It is then, and only then, they are *completely* alone and intimate as man and wife.

### **Where Does the Church Go from Here?**

I imagine your reaction is incredulity. "Arranged marriages? Servants acting as go-betweens? Dowries given to the bride's family? This is 21<sup>st</sup> century America, Pastor Heaton! This is never gonna work!" That's right. **This is 21<sup>st</sup> century America, and the "dating" practices within the fellowship of the Church resemble something more akin to a pagan, hedonistic libertine sub-culture than what is appropriate in the Body of Christ.** Am I saying we should return to arranged marriages? Not exactly. Am I saying we should treat young women as property to be exchanged for goods and wealth? Of course not. Am I saying that we should question the practice of letting a girl go on a "date" unchaperoned in the company of a boy? Well...

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<sup>15</sup> If you know the movie, then look past the source material. If you don't, then don't worry about it!

Both the stories show significant cultural norms dictating the actions that lead to matrimony. But both also have **significant principles and behaviors grounded in and derived from God's natural law**. The starting point for a "relationship" *was not a casual thing*. It was undertaken with ceremony and serious protocol *with the goal of matrimony in mind*. At every turn, the conversation and practices took place *in the presence of the family*. **What it was not** was college kids Isaac and Rebekah jetting in on Christmas break, announcing to the family that "they are getting married" and "want a big wedding" and "they are so excited!"<sup>16</sup> In the second story, there *was a progressing toward supervised freedom*.<sup>17</sup> With Isaac, there was a conversation about what had been settled, while Rebekah was modestly veiled until the acceptable time. All was done openly *with the consent of the prospective bridegroom and bride*. What there was **not** was secrecy, passion, or "test drives". In all things, there was modesty, dignity, and decorum. Isn't that something that should interest sons and daughters of the King?

One of the biggest pushbacks I get is the very practical, "Where are you supposed to meet girls? Where are you gonna meet boys **if you can't date?**" I dunno...maybe THE CHURCH! Shouldn't the Church be more proactive about giving people of marriageable age venues and opportunities to mix and get to know potential spouses? Shouldn't families "socially engineer"<sup>18</sup> (not marriages but) *potential* matches? Shouldn't local congregations use married lady members as "matchmakers"? Shouldn't families be involved *in every step* of the dating/courtship process, even when kids are away from home at college?

I close with a story, illustrating a different view of "dating", told by the father of podcaster Allie Beth Stuckey.<sup>19</sup> When Allie Beth (nee Simmons) was in high school and began to date, her dad was determined he would meet *any boy* that wanted to take her out. They would have to come over beforehand and meet in his office (Allie Beth was mortified at this!). He would make prospective suitors sit on the other side of his desk in a chair that was a *little* shorter than his. He would then question them. "I'm glad you're taking Allie Beth out tonight. What are you'll gonna do?" He would lay out ground rules about when to be home and inappropriate touching. Then he would pop the big question: *Are you gonna marry my daughter?* The boys were mortified. "No Mr. Simmons!" He would reply, "Yeah...that's good. I didn't think so. I don't expect that. But you know what this means—it means that you are dating **SOMEBODY ELSE'S WIFE TONIGHT**. It also means that someone is dating **YOUR WIFE**. And I want you to treat Allie Beth *the way you want your future wife treated*. **Can we do that?**"

In the name of Jesus, I believe we can and I believe we should.

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<sup>16</sup> By the way, meet my uncle Laban, Isaac! You're gonna love him!

<sup>17</sup> In other words, at each stage, a little more freedom was given but always under the watchful eye of the family.

<sup>18</sup> An organic, natural, getting-to-know of families through social interactions surrounding congregational life.

<sup>19</sup> A paraphrased story told on the *Relatable* podcast, episode 454 "Allie's Dad on Texas Dems, Voting Bills and Raising Strong Kids", July 14<sup>th</sup>, 2021. After listening to this, my wife and I high-fived.